

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

Creating a Professional Museum Partnership

My interest in museum work predated my joining the National Park Service. It led me to my first museum position as a museum technician and later as museum curator at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site in Colorado and as site manager at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, DC. It was while I was at the Douglass Home that I became acquainted with the African American Museum Association (AAMA). My supervisor at the time, Dorothy Benton, encouraged my participation in the AAMA.

I became active with the AAMA through membership after I decided to try to link the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) with the AAMA. In 1991, when I was stationed in Santa Fe, New Mexico as an interpretive specialist, I applied for and received an Albright-Wirth Employee Development Grant from the National Park Service. This grant allowed me to attend a AAMA meeting. My objective was to create a three-way partnership between the National Park Service, the NAI, and the AAMA to diversify all three organizations and to create a synergy that would normalize the interpretation of African-American issues in parks and museums.

When I arrived at the AAMA meeting in Roanoke, Virginia, I found that almost every type and size of museum with an African American focus was represented, from Colonial Williamsburg to the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, regional civil rights museums in big cities, and storefront museums in the rural South.

The mission of the AAMA was to assist its membership by providing the highest level of service in educating museum professionals and protecting collections. The mission of the NAI is to provide professional services, training, and standards for those working as professional interpreters, tour guides, nature guides, and docents. Many NPS interpreters are members of NAI.

Seeing the potential for long term relationship between NPS and AAMA, I approached

Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley about continued funding for my connection with this organization. The following year, I attended the AAMA annual meeting at Tampa, Florida. In order to stimulate interest in the NAI, I asked for a tabletop exhibit to be shipped from NAI headquarters in Ft. Collins, Colorado. My plan was to use the exhibit to help AAMA members better understand what interpretation was and how the NAI could assist the AAMA.

When the exhibit arrived at the hotel, I unpacked it and began to set it up. The exhibit failed to show a single non-white face. Disappointed, I took the exhibit down and packed it back up and shipped it back to NAI headquarters. I later wrote an article for the NAI newsletter in which I addressed the need for NAI to rethink the way in which the organization represented itself and recruited members.

At the Tampa AAMA meeting, I was approached by then president of AAMA, Dr. John Fleming, who at the time also served as the Director of the National Afro-American Museum at Wilberforce, Ohio. Dr. Fleming had numerous past and present connections with NPS. When he asked me if I would be interested in serving on the Board of Directors for the AAMA, I accepted.

For a variety of reasons, the original organization, the AAMA, later dissolved and the successor association, the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), was established.

In 1997, I facilitated a NPS-sponsored pre-conference workshop that focused on the issues of museum interpretation. The instructors for the course were arranged by the Stephen T. Mather Employee Development Center. Mike Watson, superintendent of Mather provided assistance in putting together this training in Baltimore, Maryland. The topics covered were varied but followed the interpretive development strategy and included visitor characteristics, the interpretive equation, tangible and intangible values, and interpretation in the museum environment. Interpretive park ranger Melinda Day spoke about the exhibit entitled "Black Voices from

Harper's Ferry" and furnishing curator Bill Brown discussed historic clothing worn by African Americans in the 19th century. Interpretive park ranger Walt McDowney covered natural history for urban audiences, and interpretive historian David Larsen performed his powerful interpretive program about John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Park ranger Mike Dixon also was part of the training team.

While we only had seating for 45, we crammed 60 participants into the hotel auditorium due to the popularity of the program. Because of the high level of enthusiasm for this pre-conference workshop, when the AAAM's Board of Directors met again in Birmingham, Alabama to plan the 1998 annual meeting, the subject of National Park Service sponsored training came up again. I recommended a training session focusing on object conservation and mounting museum objects in exhibits because I observed that many of the members of the association were struggling to preserve and exhibit objects related to African-American art, history, and culture.

In August of 1998, the annual meeting was held in Birmingham, Alabama, in cooperation with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. This well-attended function included presentations by NPS interpreters and volunteers as well as featuring a keynote presentation by National Park Service Director Robert Stanton.

I felt that Harpers Ferry would be an excellent location to train the AAAM's members for several reasons. First, the relative proximity of National and Dulles Airports made travel easy, Harpers Ferry is served by Amtrak, and the National Park Service's team of professional conservators is headquartered at a new facility in nearby Charlestown, West Virginia. Moreover, the participants would stay in the renovated dorms once a part of historic Storer College, one of the earliest of the historically black colleges in the United States. Participants would also have the opportunity to visit Harpers Ferry National Historic Park and experience interpretive programs. Once again, the Stephen T. Mather Employee Development Center and the Harpers Ferry Center (HFC) staff could not have been more supportive. Magaly Green at HFC made it possible for two participants to attend the training on scholarships.

Martin Burke, chief of the conservation laboratory at HFC, took a key role in organizing the

course agenda with the bulk of the coordination being ably handled by Mary Robinson of the Stephen T. Mather Employee Development Center.

In September, the workshop participants came together to make object conservation their focus. As might be expected, the real stars of the show were the HFC's conservators.

The purpose of the course was to help participants protect and conserve the artifacts in their museums for the future. Understanding what conservators do and knowing when and how to utilize the services of conservators was an important message for participants to take home. The first day was devoted to helping participants understand where to obtain information, services, and supplies relating to conservation. A tour of the HFC followed, which included publications, collections care, and collections storage. The afternoon dealt with developing "scope of collections statements" and collecting objects to tell a specific story. Discussions focused on how participants could obtain museum services and assistance from other organizations and agencies. The evening event was a discussion and artifact display with a distinguished graduate of Storer College.

Day two had the participants meeting with Martin Burke and his team of conservators. Participants visited the various workshops of conservators working in a number of different specific disciplines. Participants learned some of the fine points of conserving wood, cloth, ceramics, and metal objects. Participants spent much of the day learning methods of mounting exhibits without damaging the object. On day three, the participants learned about other NPS training opportunities and the options for obtaining curatorial advice, training, and supplies using the Internet.

William Billingsley, executive director of AAAM and 1997–1998 Association President Juanita Moore, then curator of the Memphis Civil Rights Museum, expressed interest in another pre-conference workshop. At the 1999 winter meeting, newly elected Association president Rita Organ, curator at the Charles Wright Civil Rights Museum in Detroit, presided over a discussion of what the 1999 pre-conference workshop would be.

The group decided to attempt a one-day version of the conservation workshop. The pre-conference workshop will be held the day before

the annual conference begins in Detroit, Michigan. Under the leadership of Gary Cummins, a team of conservators led by Martin Burke will help even more members of the AAAM to preserve and protect relics of the past that are a part of our collective history.

This partnership is an example of how people working together can create and maintain continuing connections between federal agencies and non-profit organizations with similar goals. In his keynote speech at the AAAM meeting last summer in Birmingham, Director Stanton challenged the NPS to commit itself to greater partici-

pation in AAAM events. He urged NPS to assist the AAAM and its mission while creating relationships that can help the National Park Service better accomplish its mission as well.

Given the growing relationship between Harpers Ferry Center, the Stephen T. Mather Employee Development Center, NAI and the Association of African American Museums, we are on our way to meeting that challenge.

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NPS Diversity Web Page

In 1998, as part of my work for the Diversity Advisory Committee of the National Park Service, I was asked to create a National Park Service web page to assist the committee in its efforts to communicate service wide recommendations, strategies, and investigations of issues pertaining to the full implementation of workforce diversity in the National Park Service. Although the work of the Diversity Committee continues, the Diversity Web Page is now up and the information on this page can be accessed by any interested person.

The Diversity Web Page can be found at <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/divst.htm>> and begins with a statement by Robert Stanton, Director of the National Park Service. At the end of Mr. Stanton's statement is a link to the next page, Visit Our List of National Park Service Diversity Web Sites <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/1divst.htm>>. This page contains a list of all National Park Service Diversity efforts organized by a common theme. The categories are:

- National Parks That Illustrate Diversity
- National Park Web Sites That Illustrate Diversity
- National Park Service Diversity Publications
- National Park Service Diversity Programs and Partners
- National Park Service Diversity Announcements
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities
- Jobs
- Department of the Interior
- Other Diversity Web Pages

Although more than 50 sites are listed on the Diversity Web Page, the page is not complete. I will continue to add new sites and information as our efforts to meet Director Stanton's goal "... to preserve and maintain the nation's treasures entrusted in our care, to the highest levels of quality possible, and to accomplish this through a highly skilled, dedicated workforce that exemplifies the rich diversity of our national parks and our nation..."

Any suggestions for new material or comments on how to improve the National Park Service Diversity Web Page should be sent to Harry_Butowsky@nps.gov.

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